

The identity of Buffon's *Grand Traquet*, and other mysteries in eighteenth century descriptions of birds from the Mascarene Islands and their nomenclature

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In the course of research into the early literature on the endemic birds of the Mascarene Islands in the Indian Ocean (Mauritius, Réunion, Rodrigues), I have come across 2 cases where the generally accepted names and authorities prove not to be the oldest available. In drawing attention to these, I am intending only to clarify the nomenclatural history of these species, not to change established names; indeed the names discussed below are *nomina oblita* according to the *International Code of Zoological Nomenclature* (Art. 23).

In what follows it should be recalled that during the 18th Century Réunion was known as "Bourbon" and Mauritius "Ile (or Isle) de France". Alfred Newton's survey of the state of ornithology and nomenclature at that time (Newton & Gadow 1896, Introduction: 9-14) provides useful background material on the reasons for the multiplicity of bird-naming compilations in the 1770s and 1780s.

THE REUNION GREY WHITE-EYE *Zosterops borbonicus*

The name *Zosterops borbonicus* is nowadays always quoted as being founded on the *Motacilla borbonica* of Gmelin (1789, Vol. 1 part 2: 981; viz. Berlioz 1946, Stresemann 1952, Storer & Gill 1966, Moreau 1967; see Hopkinson 1908 for publication dates of Gmelin's edition of the *Systema Naturae*). Gmelin in turn based his name on the "Figuier de l'isle de Bourbon" of Brisson (1760, 3: 510), illustrated by Plate 705, fig. 2 of the *Planches Enluminiées* (Daubenton & Martinet 1765-80). The *Planches Enluminiées* however also depicts a "grimpeur de l'isle de Bourbon" at Pl. 681, fig 2. This shows a bird closely resembling in colouration the highland (dark-bellied) brown-headed morph of the Réunion Grey White-eye, except that it has a rather long bill and yellowish (instead of white) rump and under-tail coverts.

As K. C. Parkes (*in litt.*) has suggested that this plate represents in fact the *other* (the Olive) Réunion white-eye, currently known as *Z. olivaceus* L. 1766, some further discussion is needed to establish it as a Grey White-eye. Parkes's alternative suggestion arises from the anomalous bill and rump of the plate, and Buffon's description (1778, 6: 348 "Souimanga de l'isle de Bourbon", actually by Montbeillard) of what purports to be that same specimen, in which the back colour is described as greenish-brown (it is dark chestnut in the plate). While it is true that the Olive White-eye has a greenish-yellow rump, yellowish under-tail coverts and a long bill like a sunbird (with which group Buffon classed the bird), the back is never remotely brownish, nor the flanks chestnut-rusty (they are whitish with, sometimes, a brownish wash). Moreau's "rufous" (1957) could be taken against this, but in context is only relative; Gadow (1884) correctly described the flank colour as "pale isabelline or russet brown", and this is confirmed by Berlioz (1946), Gill (1971), Barré & Barau (1982) and my own colour slides of live birds in the hand (the one reproduced in Staub (1976) is too poorly rendered to be of use). Montbeillard described the flight feathers as blackish edged paler (but not green),

and, more significantly, made no mention of a white eye-ring, though there is a faint pale zone in the plate which Parkes suggests represents this feature. Fortunately, however, we have Montbeillard himself as a counter-check. A few pages earlier (6: 337), he redescribed Brisson's "Grimpereau olive de Madagascar" (1760, 3: 625), giving a much more accurate description of a Réunion Olive White-eye, complete with eye-ring, grey-brown underparts, olive-green upperparts and edgings to flight feathers, and the characteristic dark crown and forehead (cf. Gadow 1884, Berlioz 1946, Gill 1970, 1971, Barré & Barau 1982). Apart from another over-long bill, the measurements given also closely fit the Réunion Olive White-eye, though Montbeillard submerged it as a "variety" of his "Soui-manga olive à gorge pourprée". The currently accepted name for this species, *Z. olivaceus* (from Linnaeus's *Certhia olivacea* of 1766 (Moreau 1957b)), is founded on Brisson's adequate description of this bird, stated to occur in Madagascar, but based on a specimen originating in Bourbon (Brisson *loc. cit.*, Moreau *loc. cit.*), the same specimen later described by Buffon/Montbeillard and illustrated rather badly by Plate 575: 1 of the *Planches Enluminées*.

The bird's bill in Plate 681: 2, while more suited to an Olive than a Grey White-eye, is not in fact much outside the range found in the latter (based on bill: wing (exposed primaries) ratio taken from several pictures and colour slides, varying in the Grey from 3.3 (Berlioz 1946) to 5.2 (Gill 1973), and in the Olive from 3.3 (*Pl. Enl.*) to 3.7 (Barré & Barau 1982); in Pl. 861: 2 it is 3.1). The rump colour (chestnut-yellow in the plate, greenish-yellow in Montbeillard's description) is probably due to staining in the preparation of the specimen. I therefore believe that the plate definitely represents a Réunion Grey White-eye.

Gmelin (1788, 1: 471), citing Buffon's description first in his synonymy, called Pl. 681 (2) *Certhia borbonica* (*sic*; obviously a typographical error). However Boddaert (1783) had already applied the same name to Pl. 681 (2), founding his name directly on the picture; thus even if the bird Montbeillard was describing (and hence Gmelin's name) is open to question, Boddaert's name, given to the much less equivocal plate, stands. *Certhia borbonica* Bodd. 1783 is thus the oldest legitimate binomial for the Grey White-eye on Réunion, a fact recognised long ago by Schlegel (Schlegel & Pollen 1868, Newton 1868), but subsequently forgotten. As no name change is required, I propose that Boddaert be again accepted as the authority for the name of this species. This avoids the undesirable awkwardness of a junior homonym being used as the valid name.

The white-eye specimens drawn by Martinet for the *Planches Enluminées* have long since disappeared (pers. obs in Paris museum; Storer & Gill 1966; see also footnote p. 274 of Jouanin 1962), so Pl. 681 (2) becomes the lectotype of *Certhia borbonica* Bodd. The other Réunion Grey White-eye depicted, Pl. 705: 2, shows, to my eye (& Parkes's, *in lit.*), Gill's (1973) lowland brown-headed brown form, pale bellied (*contra* Storer & Gill (1966) who thought it nearer the darker upland morph).

Some further complication might arise if it was thought desirable to revive the various subspecies of Grey White-eye that have been described in the literature; these varieties are at present treated as colour morphs of a single race (Gill 1973). Storer & Gill (1966), describing 2 new subspecies and designating 2 others from existing names, decided not to base the nominate

race on Brisson's or Buffon's descriptions, nor on the *Planches Enluminées*, but rather to follow Hartlaub's (1877) deliberate designation of the grey-headed brown form as nominate *borbonicus*. I believe this remains the best course, as official nomenclatural identification of any of the colour morphs (= "races") with the type picture would result in the name *borbonicus* being transferred from one morph to another, an obviously undesirable move. Indeed all 3 brown-backed morphs are candidates for being nominate *borbonicus*: the highland brown-headed ("*alopekion*") from *Pl. Enl.* 681: 2, the lowland brown-headed ("*xerophila*") from *Pl. Enl.* 705: 2, and the grey-headed as designated by Hartlaub. The Mauritian race remains *Z. b. mauritianus* Gmelin 1789 ("*Motacilla mauritiana*"), based on the "figuier bleu" of Buffon (again actually Montbeillard) and *Pl.* 705 (1) of the *Planches Enluminées* (which Boddaert wrongly assigned improbably to the *Motacilla sialis* of Linnaeus, otherwise the North American Bluebird).

THE MAURITIUS CUCKOO-SHRIKE *Coracina typica*

Buffon, or rather Montbeillard, described, under the title "Grand Traquet" (1778, 6: 122), a bird of unknown origin said to have been remarked on by Commerson, presumably in the manuscripts of the by then dead traveller-naturalist. Oustalet (1897) discussed aspects of the surviving Commerson MSS at some length, but does not reveal that he found anything (description or drawing) pertaining to the "Grand Traquet". He was, however, only considering known Mascarene matters, and would no doubt have overlooked this bird of unknown provenance. Commerson's own name for the bird, if any, is not recorded, though the MSS are still preserved in Paris (Laissus 1978) and might yet reveal more information.

Montbeillard described the bird as follows (my translation): "It is with good reason that we call this bird the Great Chat; it is seven and a quarter inches from the tip of its beak to the end of its tail [= 196 mm, a French inch was 27.07 mm], and six and a half inches from the top of the beak to the tip of its claws. The beak is an inch long, without notches. The tail, about two inches long, is a little forked; the folded wing covers half of it. The tarsus is of eleven lines [25 mm; 12 lines = 1 inch]; the middle toe seven, the rear one as many; its claw is the biggest. Mr. Commerson reported the existence of this bird without indicating the country where he saw it, but the description which we give here may permit its recognition and rediscovery by travellers. Brown is the dominant colour. There are two tones of brown intermingled on the head; a uniform brown covers the upper side of the neck and body. The throat is a mixture of brown and whitish. The breast is brown, which is also the colour of the wing-coverts and the outer web of the primaries, the inner being split rusty and brown. This brown is also found at the extremity of the tail feathers, and covers half the middle ones, the rest being rusty but for the outer webs of the two outer feathers which are white. The underside of the body is rusty coloured."

This description closely fits a female Mauritius Cuckoo-shrike (*viz.* Pollen 1866, Sharpe 1879, Benson 1971, & photo in Staub 1976), a bird now usually known as *Coracina typica* (ex *Oxynotus typicus* Hartlaub 1865), *viz.* Peters *et al.* 1960), and whose unhappy nomenclatural history has been summarised by Newton (*in* Pollen 1866) and Sclater (1914; 1924-30, 2: 593). Commerson spent four and a half years (1768 till his death in 1773) based in Mauritius, and described and illustrated many birds from the Mascarenes in

his notes, which were eventually to reach Buffon (Oustalet 1897). Sonnerat, who worked for Commerson in Mauritius from 1768 to 1771 (Ly-Tio-Fane 1978), listed a "Pie-grièche [shrike] de l'isle de France, appelée le Serrurier" in a MS list of his collections (Oustalet *loc. cit.*, footnote p. 56), so it is clear that he collected a Mauritius Cuckoo-shrike, probably for Commerson and thus probably the bird that Buffon described.

Apart from its historical interest, the significance of the identification of this bird of Buffon's is that Gmelin gave the Grand Traquet a Linnean name, *Motacilla magna* (1789, 1 (2): 968), thus establishing considerable priority for the species. However this name has of course never been used in the literature, and should be placed on the Official Index of Rejected Names. The type specimen, if indeed Montbeillard was using a specimen rather than copying Commerson's description, no longer exists (Jouanin 1962).

OTHER QUERIES

There are several other birds in the 18th Century encyclopaedias listed as coming from the Mascarenes, but not identifiable with any extant or recent member of the avifauna. Some are due to errors in labelling, the bird really coming from elsewhere. Stresemann (1952) considered the oriental collections in Brisson as a whole, and established that the "Guespier de l'isle de France" (*Pl. Enl.* 252) was collected by Poivre in the Philippines (*Merops americanus* P. L. S. Müller = *M. bicolor* Bodd. = *M. badius* Gm., all now synonymised with *M. viridis* L.). Likewise the "Bouvreuil de l'isle Bourbon" (*Pl. Enl.* 204: 1), Buffon's "Bouvreuil", is the South American emberizid *Sporophila bouvreuil* (ex *Loxia bouvreuil* P. L. S. Müller 1776 = *L. nigraurantia* Bodd. = *L. aurantia* Gm.); Hellmayr (1938) gave some details, though it seems Müller intended to call it *L. bourbonensis*, but confused the 2 birds on Plate 204 (see Sharpe's synonymies, 1888 pp. 113 & 347). Two others, also first appearing in Buffon, and in the *Planches Enluminées*, are the "Merle Vert de l'isle de France" (1778, 5: 240 & 648: 2) and the un-named second flycatcher from Bourbon (1775 4: 107 & 572: 3). Neither has been definitely identified with any existing species. The "merle vert" has been referred to the glossy starling genus *Calornis* (see Giebel 1872-77, Oustalet 1897), now called *Aplonis*, but has long *Sturnus*-like pointed feathers on the head and neck which *Aplonis* spp. lack, appears paler in both the picture and the description than any glossy starling, and is also somewhat too small. The "flycatcher", judging by the picture rather than Buffon's very cursory description, can only be an American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla* (L.) or a very closely allied but undiscovered form: the underparts are reddish and buff rather than white, but no other small flycatcher-like bird has the same pattern of red patches on wings and tail (cf. the very accurate rendering of *S. ruticilla* in *Pl. Enl.* 566: 1). The "merle vert" carries the latin name *Turdus mauritianus* Gm., the "gobe-mouche" that of *Muscicapa rufiventris* Gm.

At least one species cited, Brisson's "Gros bec de l'isle de Bourbon" (= *Lonchura striata* (L.); *Pl. Enl.* 153: 1) represents a temporarily successful introduction to the island (Stresemann 1952), the source of information and the specimen, Lanux, being impeccable; no "jacobins" have been reported since (Cheke in press a).

The "Mordoré" (1778, 5: 103 & 321: 2), also from Bourbon, appears, as Berlioz (1946) pointed out, to be simply one of the frequent colour sports of the Madagascar Fody or Cardinal *Foudia madagascariensis*. Hachisuka (1953)

and Moreau (1960) preferred to see in it an extinct Réunion fody, although it does not correspond in plumage to the abundant "moyneaux" described in the 1670s by Dubois (Berlioz *loc. cit.*) and already extinct before the end of that century (Cheke in press a). The "Mordoré" has acquired a Linnean name: *Foudia bruante* (ex *Fringilla bruante* P. L. S. Müller = *Emberiza fuscofulva* Bodd. = *E. borbonica* Gm.).

This leaves the "Gobe-mouche de l'isle de France" (1778, 5: 238) on which Gmelin based his *Muscicapa undulata* (1789, 1 (2): 940). This bird, blackish-headed, rusty-backed and mottled blackish, rusty and white below, has been assimilated by some authors to the African *Muscicapa adusta* (Sharpe (1879) gave a synonymy), though it is hard to see why, as the African bird is dull grey-brown. While it clearly is not *M. adusta*, equally it cannot with certainty be equated with the known Mauritian flycatcher *Terpsiphone bourbonensis desolata* Salomonsen 1933, although the description bears some resemblance to birds moulting from juvenile to adult plumage (Cheke in press b), except that actual Mauritius Paradise Flycatchers never show any white. Buffon baldly stated that the specimens (apparently a male & a female) were sent from the Ile de France, but gave no further particulars. As the specimens, like most of the Cabinet du Roi described by Buffon, are no longer extant (Stresemann 1952, Jouanin 1962), it seems unlikely that "*Muscicapa undulata*" can be satisfactorily identified. Buffon did, in fact, have available a good description of the Mauritian flycatcher sent him by de Querhoent (1773), and prepared this for publication under the title "Le Coq Maron de l'isle de France gros comme une gorge rouge"; but the supplement for which it was intended was never published.

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